Where we do stand on integrity?

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Three years ago, the prime minister introduced the idea of a National Integrity Plan, to promote ethical practices.

It was a commendable effort as the prime minister has been championing ethics and integrity as one of his main platforms for change for a better Malaysia.

The people support it as a bold initiative that many felt was overdue.

Added to this is the concept of Islam Hadhari which boosts integrity in all walks of life.

The National Fatwa Council had given its unanimous support as the way forward to make Malaysia more dynamic and progressive.

Islam Hadhari principles are consistent with the tenets of many other belief systems.

Apart from "cultural and moral integriti" as one of its stated principles, the others include good governance, a balanced economy,

justice and trustworthiness, care for the environment, care for the minority and women, good quality of life and strong defences.

All are grounded on sound ethics and integrity without which it is difficult to envisage Malaysia going to the next level of development beyond just economics.

Ethics and integrity must be embedded through the education system— but not just religious education alone.

For example, in recent times, science and technology education, too, is in need of ethics and integrity.

This is especially so in the emerging areas of life sciences which, after all, are said to reshape the landscape of science and the future of humanity, too.

Unfortunately, to date, it is still where ethics and integrity fit in many of the emerging areas, such as stem cell research.

Unless there is a clear delineation, many continue to be sceptical, leading to an ethical Catch-22 situation.

Foremost, which comes first, the potential benefit of exploiting new knowledge to provide cures for diseases, or the preservation of universal ethical principles that protect human dignity?

When it came to light that a prominent South Korean stem cell researcher had violated fundamental ethical practices, the world was unforgiving.

He was accused of fabricating the data of two stem cells to make it look as if there were for 11.

That these studies were published by internationally reputable peer-reviewed journals only adds to the complexity of the dilemma.

In particular, when new knowledge churned out has grown by leaps and bounds, the tendency for a similar growth in scientific fraud seems inevitable.

In 2005, the US Office of Research Integrity, a federal agency responsible for investigating scientific misconduct, received 265 allegations of falsified research.

This was more than in the previous years.

Analyst Martha Mendoza claims that scientific misconduct complaints recorded by the Department of Health and Human Services in the US in 2004 were 50 per cent more than in 2003.

Some blame this on the present culture of "publish-or-perish" as the main indicator of productivity.

And this is usually based on the number of studies published in reputable journals.

Others say this doctrine drives professors to dishonesty. This opinion is expressed by the chancellor and a professor of anthropology at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) (Change, 1992).

According to Mendoza such unethical incidents tell a story of "struggle with power, lies and the crushing pressure of academia" where even big names in big institutions seem to be vulnerable.

The increasing pressure to "market" anything educational has in fact opened up even wider opportunities for unethical behaviour and fraudulent practices.

Some are rather subtle.

The Chronicle of Higher Education, in its Sept 17,2004 issue, commented how institutions are adopting an "attract to reject" approach because turning down a greater proportion of applicants wins a "more selective" ranking in magazine surveys.

Such manipulative strategies have rendered the rankings of universities exercise more intellectually dishonest.

This correlates well with the large number of North American universities which have vehemently refused to be ranked in such surveys.

There is also the so-called new discipline of "enrolment management" which allows institutions to turn selective universities into "bastions of privilege" rather than "engines of opportunity".

According to the same issue of Chronicle, this is done by focusing on applicants who are financially independent or have good test scores.

For the rest, there will be a greater mismatch, with the merit system a rigid and inflexible one.

It follows that students are tempted to falsify their academic qualifications to increase their chances of acceptance.

George Brown of HigherEd Consulting, involved closely with the Australian Council for Private Education and Training, says 20 per cent of all applicants for employment positions falsify their academic credentials.

In 2002, the US-based Educational Testing Service, announced it was cancelling its GRE Computer Science Subject Test in China and India because of widespread cheating (IHT, Oct, 15).

It is evident, therefore, that issues paramount to later working life must be tackled as early in life as possible, beginning with basic education.

As mentioned by the dean of Yale School of Management, Enron's former chief financial officer Andrew Fastow would likely have turned out to be a bad apple no matter what he was taught in graduate school.

"That kind of character must be developed much earlier than the typical age of a business school student, about 27," Professor Jeffrey E. Garten said.

"I don't believe B-schools can turn someone who is dishonest into a virtuous person."

In the case of World Bank president Paul Wolfowitz's handling of a hefty pay package for his girlfriend, a failure in integrity will be a reflection of a failure in education — one that needs to be urgently addressed.